

DESIGN

A FINE ART

Cara Saven spotted a gap in the market 17 years ago. Today she runs a successful wallpapering company, with operations and clients all over the world

Adele Shevel

● Wallpaper isn't traditionally associated with high-end living. Rather, during its boom years in the 1920s and 1930s, it was found in homes at the lower end of the British market. Today it's a different story. And few have tapped into the wallpaper revival quite as successfully as Cara Saven.

Cape Town-based Saven's designs adorn West Hollywood hotels, New York's Park Lane hotel and Marriot group hotels around the US. Cara Saven Wall Design's work features in the Serengeti Sopa Lodge in Tanzania, the Victoria Falls Hotel in Zimbabwe and, closer to home, at the Cape Grace hotel and at Lefika Villas in Sun City.

She has representatives in Singapore, India, Australia, the Netherlands, the UK and the US, and is looking for more international markets ("I just need to find the right printer and the right partner and the rest is making magic.") And she's launched a spin-off, CS4d (Cara Saven for Décor), with a move into other product lines — notably tablecloths, napkins and wall hangings.

Saven hasn't always been an entrepreneur; she got her start in the Woolworths textile management training programme, which she entered straight out of university. After working as a buyer for the company, she left to join a large consultancy for three years. "It was the worst job I've ever had," she says, "but it taught me not to be scared of technology." And it allowed her to make enough money to travel with her husband for a year.

While travelling she imported a range of footwear from Vietnam, which Pick n Pay's clothing division saw, trialled and decided to place a large order for. At that point she had to decide whether to become a supplier to a retailer or go back to buying in head office. "I had seen the other side and had seen suppliers to large retailers see their tail. And as a buyer I

life



Cara Saven: Making magic



knew that I just never wanted to be in that position.”

She chose to return to Woolworths.

Then, 17 years ago, Saven saw a gap in the market. At the time, she'd been taking photos of companies' products and selling them back as artworks. "I wouldn't only sell them the images but arrange the printing and installation process. Then I realised that wallpaper is a beautiful animal. You only have limited options of what to do on a wall. You either paint it, put a picture on it or put wallpaper on it, and wallpaper wasn't a thing yet," she tells the FM.

"I could see what was happening in France, who, in my opinion, are the doyens of the wallpaper world. Because we are incredibly innovative in the décor space here in South Africa, I had a feeling it would catch on quickly ... I think we are ahead of the rest of the world in this custom-printed wallpaper space."

Bespoke business

As part of her business model, Saven's company holds no stock; only once a deposit is paid is there go-ahead with the design. This is followed by installation, with a quick turnaround time. "Because we're not a stock-carrying business, every one of our orders goes through our design department. They set the

design up specifically to the size of that wall so the client ends up getting the design perfectly suited to the shape of their wall."

Everything is tailored to the client. Customers can order fully bespoke designs or choose from the 3,000-odd patterns on the website. "If you like the design but don't like the scale or the colour we can change it. If you've seen something on the website or you've seen something else you like we can do a version of it," she says.

"But the business model is such that we have a small team with amazing intellectual property, huge amounts of design work that we've collected over the past 17 years, and my designers are really good and quick at taking a design,

rejigging it and making it look as if it is custom-made for that wall space."

Still, she's not aiming to be the next de Gournay. That's "like the Shangri-La of wallpaper. It's hand-painted in China, it has a long legacy, it's like a family-run business. But it is incredibly unaffordable for most people. While we look to them for inspiration, we prefer to be like the Zara of the wallpaper industry — constant newness and exciting designs."

Given its overseas footprint and expansion plans, it's a business on the rise. Though the company's financial details are private, it is part of the Entrepreneurs Organisation in South Africa, which requires turnover of more than R1m for membership, excluding

overseas business. Take the broader company, and the overseas business accounts for about a third of turnover (though that's fuelled by the weak exchange rate).

Still, she wouldn't mind spinning some of it off. "From an overseas perspective, I would love for the American business to get swallowed up, possibly by a bigger organisation with greater reach," she says.

There's a lot of potential in this "beast" of a market, she adds. "The US is about five to 10 years behind us in catching on [to the wallpaper trend], which is why it's a great market for us to get into before it really takes hold."

As it is, her product has found traction in places including Florida and Texas, where there's more appetite for larger images.

A takeover would certainly help in the "tricky" market, she says. "We have all this IP, all this know-how, but it would be amazing to feed into another company that is dealing with a huge client base."

As for the local front? "Maybe there will be a time somewhere in the future [for a buyout], but the fit needs to be good. I know lots of people who have sold ... for the money rather than the fit. This has got my name on it, it's got to be the right fit." ✘

